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**POLITICAL FOOT-SOLDIER: COLIN POWELL'S INTERAGENCY CAMPAIGN FOR
THE "BASE FORCE"**

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POLITICAL FOOT-SOLDIER

Introduction

. . . as for myself, I expect to go back to a nice quiet foxhole where I can serve my country in a more comfortable and, perhaps, less-exposed position

—Lt Gen Colin Powell, two years before he became Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff¹

Things don't always work out as planned. Instead of his coveted "quiet foxhole," General Colin Powell was rapidly thrust into the highest military position in the land, at a time when our nation was simultaneously ending a "cold war" and beginning "hot" one. It is against this backdrop, though, that General Powell rose to the occasion with several inspiring successes. One of Colin Powell's most notable successes was the development and deployment of the "Base Force" plan.

The Base Force proposal involved a 25% cut in military force structure across the board. General Powell took on this massive bureaucratic project at a time when our nation was in transition, and distracted by numerous contingencies. Ambassador Richard Armitage characterized Powell's work on the Base Force as "the finest example of civilian control and military advice."² It persisted in "pure" form for over 5 years, and was still the basis for the United States military force structure at the turn of the millennium. Indeed, current military

¹ Department of State Bulletin, October 1988, Address before the World Affairs Council in Los Angeles, July 19, 1988. Gen Powell is Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs.

² Richard Armitage, "Colin Powell as JCS Chairman: A Panel Discussion on American Civil-Military Relations," Oct 23, 1995, John M. Olin Institute Working Papers, edited by Michael Desch and Sharon Weiner, 8.

leaders say they are still “happy” with the force structure we have now, as a result of Powell’s groundbreaking work.³

How did one military leader manage to develop, and enact into law, such a sweeping policy change that was initially opposed by elements within and without his organization? What were the factors and methods that allowed him to successfully navigate the interagency process at the highest levels? This study will attempt to answer those questions by first exploring three main ingredients of General Powell’s success: experience, environment, and resources. Those three ingredients have long been common to another profession—that of the “politician.” Therefore, this study will also show that the skill set required of a successful politician and a successful military leader are remarkably similar. Next, this paper will describe the “campaign” utilized to achieve his objective of a legislated Base Force. Finally, a summary of results and enduring lessons will be provided.

Experience

Politicians know how to use “experience.” An astute candidate always points out a diverse background to his various constituencies. In front of the VFW, he is a veteran. When speaking to the NRA, he is a gun owner. And, when kissing babies, he is a parent. Diverse experience is a strength, allowing the leader to understand and communicate with various groups. Colin Powell had just such a diverse background, and he used it to his advantage.

General Powell was born to parents that were first-generation immigrants. He is sensitive to issues of foreign policy. He rose through the ranks as a black soldier that was able to advance

³ Senior military officer, questioned (under non-attribution) by author, freehand notes, National Defense University, Washington, DC, Jan 2002.

“based on performance.” He can understand the “minority view” and is willing to give the “little guy” a break.⁴ He also understands politics and the bureaucracy to a level seldom seen in military officers.

General Powell’s unusually successful career landed him in several positions that were out of the normal military chain of command. In 1972, he became a White House fellow, working for Frank Carlucci in the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). When Carlucci became National Security Advisor, he named General Powell as his deputy. President Reagan picked Powell for National Security Advisor in 1987.⁵ By the time he became the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1989, Powell had seen and participated in the highest levels of government across several large agencies.

Environment

Politicians know how to use the “environment.” Savvy politicians gauge the passions of their constituency. They know the legal boundaries of their power and the intricacies of the political network. Colin Powell knew his environment—an environment that had changed significantly with the enactment of a recent defense reorganization. While General Powell was not the first Chairman to serve under the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols legislation⁶, he is widely considered as the first to exploit it.

⁴ Jon Meacham, “How Colin Powell Plays the Game,” *Washington Monthly* 26, no. 12 (Dec 1994): 35.

⁵ Bruce W. Nelan, “Ready for Action,” *Time* 136, no. 21 (Nov 12, 1990): 29

⁶ The Goldwater-Nichols Act became law midway through Admiral Crowe’s term as chairman. General Powell was his successor.

The intent of the Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 (Goldwater-Nichols Act) was, in one author's words, to "drain the military's bureaucratic swamp."⁷ It subordinated the individual service chiefs to the Chairman, and gave the Chairman enhanced responsibilities as the principle military advisor to the President. General Powell felt that the new legislation not only allowed him to act unilaterally, it *required* him to do so.⁸

The environment that surrounded the development of the Base Force proposal also included radical changes in U.S. foreign policy following the fall of the Berlin wall. The American public was clamoring for a "peace dividend," while new regional threats were demanding a review of appropriate military capabilities. General Powell's broad knowledge of the "new" environment shaped the way he approached the interagency process.

Resources

Politicians know how to use their "resources." No political campaign would be possible without the full cooperation of personal staffs, political allies, and a willing news media. A successful political campaign "leverages" all networked resources to produce a synergistic effect.

In addition to empowering the chairman, the Goldwater-Nichols Act (GNA) also gave him resources. The Chairman now had a "joint staff" composed of top-notch military officers that were aspiring to flag (General officer) rank. These officers could not only help him formulate policy proposals, they could also help him refine his own views by regular critique and debate.

⁷ Katherine Boo, "How Congress won the war in the gulf," *Washington Monthly* 23, no.10 (Oct 1991): 31.

⁸ Lorna S. Jaffe, "The Development of the Base Force 1989-1992," Joint History Office, Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Page 13: Jaffe notes, "He believed that, as a result of the Goldwater-Nichols reform, it was his responsibility to initiate a change in strategy, and he did not wish to be accused of not responding to world events."

General Powell also had quite a network of associates in the Washington area from his many years as a politico. All of these human resources would contribute to his objectives.

General Powell was very astute at the “media message.” He had learned during his years in the White House that any successful campaign involved a clear message and vigorous public debate. He had learned to match the appropriate correspondents to the themes he portrayed, and how to time his messages for maximum effect. The news media “resource” would also play a key role in his strategies.

On the other hand, Colin Powell was acutely aware of his resource limitations as well. As he mentioned in a 1990 speech,

We must find a balance between our superpower base force requirements and what the American people are willing to pay for. That is what the budget debate in Washington is all about.⁹

Appreciation of federal budget resources would prove to be a significant part of success in navigating the “treacherous seas” of the interagency process.

⁹ General Colin L. Powell, “U.S. Foreign Policy in a Changing World: Keeping Democracy Alive.” (Delivered to the Town Hall of California, Sheraton Grande Hotel, Los Angeles, California, March 23, 1990.) *Vital Speeches of the Day*, LVI, no. 14 (May 1, 1990).

Navigating the “Interagency”

[Colin Powell] knows how to work the departmental and interagency process

--Margaret Tutwiler, Aide to James Baker.¹⁰

General Powell’s outstanding reputation as an effective bureaucrat was built largely from his success in negotiating large interagency issues. His “navigation” of the Base Force plan from concept to law illustrates how he blended the three ingredients of experience, environment, and resources into a robust strategy. Put simply, it was a “campaign,” much like a political or special interest campaign. However, his campaign used political tools and methods to achieve an unselfish, nonpartisan objective—enhanced national security.

General Powell’s campaign for the Base Force took over two years to complete. During that period, he pursued a methodical progression through a logical sequence of phases. His campaign began with a phase of “anticipation” where the intellectual groundwork was laid for future challenges. Once the challenge was clear, he entered an “internal audience” phase, where he progressively “won over” the service chiefs and other key players within the uniformed military. This phase was followed by refinement of the plan, based in internal feedback.

The next phase engaged the “external government audience” that included the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), the National Security Council (NSC) and the White House. This phase was again followed by refinement of the plan based on feedback. After winning the internal and external government entities, general Powell set out to win the “public” debate with Congress and with the American people. Once again, he followed this phase with more

¹⁰ Meacham, “How Colin Powell Plays the Game,” 34.

refinement and persistence until his plan was officially adopted into law. Finally, General Powell took steps to ensure the “sustainment” of the new policy. He continued to publicize the concept to broader audiences and to craft a military strategy that matched, and supported, the force structure outlined in the Base Force legislation.

Although Powell was later critiqued in some circles for “overstepping the bounds” of civilian control by pursuing such aggressive campaigns, he did so in a way that was respectful and diplomatic. If he was indeed cavalier, nobody noticed at the time. To explain how general Powell was able to pursue such an aggressive campaign, while minimizing his organizational “risk,” the following paragraphs will synthesize the “means” (the three ingredients) and the “ways” (campaign phasing) he employed on the path to his “ends” (the objective.)

Anticipation/Preparation

Notably, the groundwork for Powell’s Base Force proposal started well in advance of his opportunity to actually influence events. As a forward-thinking leader, he anticipated that the Soviet Union would someday fall, precipitating a radical review and restructure of the U.S. military. He also felt strongly that a new force structure would require a new National Military Strategy as well.¹¹ Fortunately, the JCS Joint Staff had also begun thought on the issue in a project called “Quiet Study” in 1988. Upon assuming the post of Chairman of the JCS, Powell continued research with “Quiet Study II.”

¹¹ Jaffe, 1.

Internal Audience/Refinement

When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, Powell was ready to “move out” with his campaign for the Base Force. His first obstacle was convincing his own service chiefs and regional Commanders in Chief (CINCs) to abandon the policy of “forward defense” and acquiesce to the home-basing strategy of the Base Force. With awareness of the new GNA *environment*, he stepped out firmly, but also took steps to educate an audience that was still adjusting to a new era of “jointness.” His bottom line argument to his internal audience was that the military was better off reforming itself, versus being forcibly reformed by Congress.

General Powell’s *experience* as National Security Advisor with “floors and ceilings” in arms control talks influenced his approach to the restructuring. He coined the term “Base Force” to describe a floor of military capability “beneath which we dare not go.”¹² Once Powell’s position was clear to his internal audience, he tasked his staff to refine his concept to take valid critiques into consideration. His refined position on the Base Force was translated into a “briefing,” then re-publicized to his subordinates. This time he ratcheted up the pressure by informing the service chiefs that, at the minimum, they “must accept force cuts.”¹³ Notably, he concentrated on the service chiefs individually, rather than as a group. Even though he did not win over all of his internal audience, Powell had achieved a following, and had “planted seeds” with his detractors.

¹² Powell, “U.S. Foreign Policy,” 421.

¹³ Jaffe, 18.

External Government Audience/Refinement

General Powell's campaign plan for the Base Force was designed to propel the plan through several external agencies, but his first challenge was close to home. He had to "sell" it to his immediate superiors in OSD, and to the remainder of the executive branch. His first step was to effectively empower his *resources* by delegating campaign duties to his staff. He instructed his JCS subordinates to "win over" their peers in OSD, one office at a time.¹⁴

During the process of consensus building with his external government audience, Powell employed an interesting technique of "issue metering." As he sensed resistance to specific parts of his plan, he would adjust the intensity of the individual part to retain consensus on the overall plan. In the Base Force proposal this effect would usually manifest itself in terms of troop strength—if 75,000 European troops were considered too few, he would adjust to "less than 100,000." By doing this, he would still achieve his overall goal of overseas troop reductions while continuing to build consensus. In this way, General Powell was also able to refine and strengthen his position for the next phase of his campaign.

External Public Audience/Refinement

General Powell "went public" with his proposal, even though his service chiefs were still split on the issues. He saw time running out as the American public began to clamor for the "peace dividend" that would come from Congressionally mandated force cuts.¹⁵ What followed his public debut was an interesting and instructive series of exchanges in the public forum between himself and the Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, Senator Sam

¹⁴ Ibid., 24.

¹⁵ Jaffe, 28.

Nunn. While not directly challenging a representative of civilian control, General Powell artfully “buried” his debate responses in the text of broader speeches to various public groups.¹⁶ As the “war of public speeches” progressed, each official incorporated valid counterpoints and refined their position toward a consensus. As the debating *environment* matured, Powell became increasingly emboldened with his choice of audiences, culminating in several very direct appeals to members of the foreign policy elite. His eventual directness was especially bold given that his views had not been officially endorsed by the SECDEF.¹⁷

In his final battle in the public forum, General Powell employed the *resources* of the news media. In a bid to influence upcoming OSD discussions and Congressional debate, he arranged interviews with leading news outlets, such as the *Washington Post*. His news articles “bracketed” his position by defining the “upper and lower” limits that he would recommend. The totality of his campaign was succeeding—on June 6th, 1990, Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney publicly agreed to force cuts, signaling a turning point in the campaign. By the end of that month, the President “indicated support” and incorporated the term “base force” into various Presidential speeches.¹⁸

Persistence/Victory

In the Fall of 1990, with victory in sight, external events intervened. The conduct of the Gulf War understandably sidelined the Base Force campaign for a time. However, even with

¹⁶ Ref: Powell, “U.S Foreign Policy” speech delivered to the Town Hall of California, March 23, 1990 (previously cited). The text of the speech is largely descriptive of current foreign policy concerns in various regions around the world. It is only in the concluding minutes of the speech that Powell inserts a brief description of “superpower responsibilities” and the corresponding argument for a “base force.”

¹⁷ Jaffe, 30.

¹⁸ Jaffe, 36.

such a diversion from his planned campaign, General Powell managed to keep the issue alive in public discussions. As part of his enviable persistence, he recognized the *environment* of the Gulf War as an opportunity to sell the concept of “force projection” as a component of his overall plan. By September of 1991, the inertia of Powell’s public campaign caused OSD to begin mandating cuts. The effect of “calling an airstrike on your own position” finally convinced service chief holdouts to get onboard with Powell’s plan as the “lesser of the evils.” On November 29th, 1991, the SECDEF directed the Base Force plan to the service chiefs. After two years of debate and adjustment, the final force structure numbers were amazingly close to Powell’s original projections. He sustained and consolidated his gains in the intervening months by introducing supporting issues that continued to bolster his positions.¹⁹ The Base Force proposal was incorporated into the FY 1992-93 budget request, and later signed into law. Powell was victorious.

Conclusions

You don’t know what you can get away with until you try

-- Colin Powell²⁰

By exploiting his diverse experience, his empowering environment, and his formidable resources General Colin Powell succeeded in navigating the interagency process to his ultimate objective. Analysis of his Base Force campaign points out a methodical approach to consensus

¹⁹ Ibid., 44.

²⁰ Oren Harari, “Quotations from Chairman Powell: A Leadership Primer,” *Management Review* 85, no. 12 (Dec 1996): 34.

building that resulted in the “first change in national strategy in over forty years.”²¹ His example demonstrates that attributes normally associated with successful politicians can be effectively applied in a military leadership setting without challenging civilian control or traditional military ethics.

In addition to the general observations above, several specific maxims can be drawn from General Powell’s Base Force campaign, for application to the interagency process:

- Anticipate and prepare for future issues
- Encourage feedback and incorporate adjustments
- Leverage your campaign through organizational delegation
- Sense resistance and “meter” your positions accordingly
- Take every opportunity to enunciate your positions
- Exploit the news media in your campaign
- Stay the course through distractions—be patient
- Sustain your results with supporting issues

While General Powell reportedly balks at the characterization of “political general,” preferring to be thought of as a “foot soldier,” his adept maneuvering in the interagency environment betrays a broader mastery of the political realm. His campaign for the Base Force demonstrated that a broad knowledge of the interagency realm is critical to government leaders that hope to participate in future national security decisions.

²¹ Jaffe, 50.